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Security Nexus Perspectives

INDIA LEADING INTERNATIONAL HADR COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

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Introduction

There are some simple reasons why there are few multinational and regional disaster response agencies.

First, most developed nations do not ask for assistance when disasters and crises strike because they have sufficient capacity to manage the response.

Second, some nations are at odds with their neighbors.

And third, some nations do not have the resources to assist others. Historically, crisis-prone nations with inadequate resources for immediate relief request assistance from well-developed affluent nations with capable militaries. These providers have typically been Western countries, but that is beginning to change.

The most well-known exception is the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre). With assistance from the United Nations and international organizations for disaster management and emergency response, the AHA Centre facilitates cooperation and coordination among ASEAN Member States when there is a large disaster or crisis. There is no equivalent in northeast Asia because the nations there prefer not to rely on their neighbors. There is also no equivalent in Australasia and the Blue Pacific because only the United States, Australia, New Zealand and France have sufficient resources to mount large assistance responses.

India is becoming another exception, as shown by its cooperative activities in the multinational realm, in regional efforts, and in the direct provision of humanitarian assistance.

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Multinational cooperation

On March 12, 2021, leaders of the United States, India, Japan and Australia met as the Quad to [reaffirm their commitment](#) to cooperate on [non-traditional security issues](#), and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). A key part of their plan was to establish a “climate working group to strengthen global actions on mitigation, adaptation, resilience, technology, capacity-building, and climate finance.” India, Australia and France already collaborate on maritime surveillance and Australia may also join the MALABAR [naval exercises](#) attended by India, Japan and the US. These engagements are certain to build capacity and interoperability that will benefit any future collaborative HADR operations in the Indian Ocean.

[India actively participates](#) in and hosts capacity-building events run by the inter-governmental [Indian Ocean Rim Association](#) (IORA). Nelsen Mandela inspired the creation of IORA in 1997 to focus on socio-economic cooperation in recognition of the fact that the region is a rapidly changing environment. IORA’s commitment is to expand mutual understanding and beneficial cooperation through a consensus-based approach. [Disaster Risk Management](#) is one of IORA’s eight focus areas and is chaired by India. In this role, India provided fisheries policy-related training to officials from Somalia and Yemen and published Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Guidelines for IORA in November 2019. Further, India hosted IORA delegates from Bangladesh, Kenya, Somalia, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Australia, Singapore and ASEAN Secretariat who participated in [India’s 4th Annual HADR Exercise](#) in Aug 2019 in Chennai.

India’s linkage with a multitude of stakeholders, including national governments, non-governmental organizations, regional and international partners, donors, civil society and the private sector, is well recognized. This is actively pursued by encouraging partnerships between governments and institutions through joint training, sharing lessons learned and best practices, building capacity and enhancing technical capacity.

Regional cooperation

India leads the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which has the potential to play an important role in disaster management. The Bay of Bengal faces many cyclones and some tsunamis that all require a transboundary approach to crisis management and risk reduction. BIMSTEC was founded in 1997, but its participants had not [awakened to the need for cooperation](#) until 2004 when they encountered the Indian Ocean tsunami. This tragic event resulted in a surge of interest in regional cooperation, however it was short-lived and BIMSTEC soon took a [backseat at the regional level](#). Although member countries put in place some policies and were willing to work on building capacity, the relief mechanisms required for success were lacking.

To counter this problem, the BIMSTEC Leaders’ retreat in 2016 called for joint exercises to improve cooperation in disaster management and initiated a BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise on the lines of [SAADMEx](#). India hosted these exercises in [2017](#) and [2020](#). The [2nd BIMSTEC disaster management exercise](#) involved 80 delegates from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Nepal in a simulation that used local resources to address flooded localities. BIMSTEC also established a [Centre for Weather and Climate](#) in 2018 and ran a workshop on building disaster-warning systems.

BIMSTEC currently focuses on the use of government and military resources in the management of disasters. However, some believe that the [priority at the regional level](#) should be a greater level of stakeholder diversity, including the private sector, and all agencies concerned with maritime security to ensure that discussions identify ways to make each of their sectors more resilient.

Humanitarian operations

Relief operations in south Asia are mainly bilateral because regional efforts such as the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters [have not been successful](#) for political reasons. However, growing prosperity has [reduced India's dependence](#) on Western humanitarian assistance and has enabled it to provide twenty-nine international humanitarian relief operations. As part of its Indian Ocean strategy [SAGAR](#) (Security and Growth for All in the Region), India provided international humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to satisfy its “[sense of obligation](#) ... to demonstrate empathy for the victims of disasters in all parts of the world” and to “[promote future bilateral dialogue](#) between the affected and the donor nation.” This assistance functioned as a diplomatic tool that deepened bilateral relations with neighbors including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

On the international HADR front, [Operation Sahayata](#) was conducted in Mozambique in March-April 2019, rescuing over 204 people and providing medical assistance to over 3500. [During the Covid pandemic, SAGAR assistance](#), including food, Covid medications, Ayurvedic medicines, and medical assistance teams, was provided to Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros.

Covid aid

India's response to the Covid pandemic continues to demonstrate its growing commitment to humanitarian aid operations. As the pandemic in India was initially fairly mild, and cases declined from October 2020 to March 2021, the nation provided international medical relief, facilitated the [repatriation of foreign nationals](#) and exported locally produced vaccines. Bharat Biotech, in combination with the state-run Indian Council of Medical Research, developed the [Indian vaccine Covaxin](#). Millions of doses are being used in the government's vaccine program, but the government is also aggressively pursuing vaccine diplomacy in Brazil, Paraguay, the Philippines, and the United Arab Emirates.

In June 2020, the private company, Serum Institute of India (SII), the world's largest vaccine manufacturer, [negotiated a license](#) to manufacture a billion AstraZeneca doses for low and middle-income countries. From January to March 2021, SII had exported [66 million doses overseas](#), which would have been sufficient to [vaccinate everyone in a few major Indian cities](#). As the second wave of infections emerged in April, another two million doses left for Paraguay.

On April 24, the government ceased to allow commercial interests to trump local health concerns when they [temporarily banned](#) the export of vaccines. As India seeks to become a major provider of international relief, it will continue to work closely with the [private sector](#), which has the resources to [scale up disaster response](#) beyond the capacity of government and military.

Throughout the Indo-Pacific, the militaries of many developing countries assume a primary responder role in addition to their core external defense mission. This is not due to existing military culture, but to the fact that the [military is brought in to fill gaps](#) left by weak and disorganized responses of civilian government. Capable, proactive governments [reduce the overdependence on the military](#) by providing adequate funding, logistics, and human resources to civilian government and opportunities to private entities that provide expertise in disaster management. While local governments often aim to achieve no casualties, their intermittent disaster risk reduction programs are typically reactive rather than proactive and lack investment. In contrast, locally-led humanitarian NGOs are often actively engaged in strengthening the capacity of local communities and many municipalities have emergency-triggered, contractual agreements with dozens of private companies.

Future emphasis

Accompanied by its economic upswing, India's credibility as a provider of humanitarian assistance, crisis relief, and regional security has improved significantly over the past two decades. India has increasingly taken the role of a regional leader, which has meant moving beyond a predominantly bilateral approach, and coordinating more often via regional mechanisms and partnerships with multilateral bodies. These deeper multilateral relationships not only provide India with the opportunity to conduct humanitarian operations beyond the immediate subcontinent, but they also increase engagement in HADR exercises and operations with Quad partners that lead to improvements in interoperability and the development of dual-use military systems.

As India grows its regional leadership portfolio, it will naturally extend its disaster management and relief operations eastward to southeast Asia and westward to Africa. But to demonstrate its leadership role and ensure a high degree of stability and security, India needs to [ensure that the regional maritime environment remains favorable and positive](#). Specifically, the Indian Navy, which has taken the lead in HADR operations, and other maritime security agencies of the [Indian Ocean Naval Symposium](#) (IONS), need to update operational procedures, particularly in light of pandemic constraints. To be more successful, these agencies will have to increase not only the number of assets they deploy, but their capacity to deliver a higher level of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief with these assets.

As the number of regional disasters increase in frequency, the number of HADR missions also increase. In a continuation of its regional efforts in south Asia, India thus needs to ensure support for BIMSTEC and its important HADR initiatives. Particular attention should be focused on the Bay of Bengal area, which requires a continued investment in [disaster management exercises](#).

As a well-recognized first responder, [India continues to modernize](#) by developing more robust internal processes, improving inter-agency and inter-ministry cooperation, and engaging more holistically with stakeholders, including civil society. During this process, rather than emphasizing particular stakeholders, India is increasing the involvement of multiple stakeholders as it develops a collective and multisectoral crisis management system that has improved capacity to provide more effective and efficient HADR support for regional crises.

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